



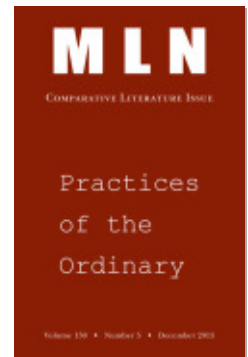
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Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language by Megan Quigley (review)

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Megan Quigley. *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 244 pages.

Few aesthetic movements better capture the expression and formalization of philosophy than modernism. For scholars of philosophy and literature—and for a century of thinkers concerned with questions of language, textuality, and authenticity—modernism’s innovations and idiosyncrasies have proven irresistible. In recent years, studies of the two have tended to focus, it seems, on the importance of analytical thought—a trend echoed in the more general attention to the practices of reading that offer new kinds of clarity and definition: the turn to cognitive science, for instance, or data analysis. But this trend, as Megan Quigley argues in *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language*, risks missing something vital at both the historical and methodological level—namely, vagueness: a problem, as she describes it, “of the imprecise boundaries of concepts” (ix) that is at the heart of both anglo-modernist philosophy and fiction. By restoring this trope to its rightful place, Quigley looks to show how these fields might be both richly confounded and ultimately wedded by their interests in ambiguity. In so doing, she is hopeful that new ways of reading will emerge that refuse the criteria of hard science and embrace the uncertainty and porosity of this era’s richest literature.

The overriding premise of this book is one of “discursive evolution” (10). Disciplinary interests in vagueness, Quigley shows, are not unidirectional, but simultaneous and symbiotic. Part of her effort to correct the overemphasis on modernism and analytic philosophy is to stress the importance of vagueness as a pragmatically valuable concept. In this sense, the project will be of interest to scholars working at the intersection of philosophy and literature more generally; Quigley’s careful tracking of this term is a useful and admirable attempt to show how these forms of discourse not only approach conceptual problems in related ways, but also how they influence and shape each other’s means of doing so. Indeed, essential to this book is the impossibility of distinction: at what point, for instance, do philosophy and fiction become separable and distinguishable categories? Empirically, we might say, the distinction is clear enough. And yet, when asked to define precisely where they diverge and assume an “authentic” form, the task becomes trickier, harder to manage, and ultimately, as Quigley helps us see, paradoxical.

For all that, however, the book—given its interest in close reading and the particular scope of its historicizing—will be of interest principally to those

who work in British and US modernism. For it is the authors of this period, as she tells us, who are uniquely interested in how conceptual ambiguities might help them “to examine psychological depth, to depict sexual indeterminacy, or to register disenchantment with the capitalist, bourgeois, and symbolic status quo while still existing within those systems” (6). Much of the book then is devoted to the history of late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth century Anglo-philosophy: charting how “the reinstatement of the vague” engendered analytic and pragmatic thought as two distinct and opposed positions. The former—whose representatives here are Bertrand Russell, Gottlob Frege, and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein—see vagueness as the source of paradox and confusion, a problem to be eliminated through “analytical methods and logical formulae” (2). The latter, pragmatism, takes an altogether different view: finding in language a necessary vagueness, which for Charles Peirce, William James, and the later Wittgenstein, is not a problem to be dispatched but a concept to be celebrated and employed. Quigley’s effort here is laudable, and her success in affording readers a lucid account of this material—however counterintuitive to vagueness, as she notes, it may be—is enough to ensure the book’s significance. But the larger methodological and theoretical claims are often lost in the highly pointed focus of her readings. By providing a comparative framework that pairs philosophers with modernist writers—sustained by close and often brilliant readings—Quigley is effective in showing that the Linguistic Turn is a descriptor as apt to the history of the novel as to philosophy. But the ramifications of this claim on our narrative of literary and philosophical development feels undertheorized and only in the final moments given its proper due.

The project’s first chapter reads Henry James with his brother, William, and their mutual friend and interlocutor, Charles Peirce. For the James brothers, vagueness in language offers the unique and “fruitful means for both philosophic investigation and narrative inspiration” (22). The famous metaphor of “stream of consciousness,” for instance, put forth by William James, is here reimaged as a boundaryless concept, reinstating vagueness in response to Peirce and read in light of Henry’s criticism and narrative technique—“specifically in [his] resistance to marriage plots, investment in vague secrets, and abstract dialogue” (25). Quigley aligns herself with recent efforts “to overturn the anti-modern approach to James by focusing on his pragmatic modernism” (24). This includes work by Ross Posnock, Lisi Schoenbach, and Joan Richardson. Quigley aligns herself as well with “studies that argue for a ‘queer’ or ‘global’ James” (including those by Kevin Ohi and Eric Haralson) by suggesting that James’s literary realism and narrative style is imbued with the sense of ambiguity championed by his pragmatic associates. Like the rest of Quigley’s writing, this chapter is sustained by its historically and biographically inflected reading, proffering at its best the claim that the much-sought-after model for the protagonist of “The Beast in the Jungle,” John Marcher, is none other than Peirce himself.

Quigley’s second chapter reads Virginia Woolf with Bertrand Russell, suggesting that Woolf’s “novels of vision” respond in opposition to Russell’s analytic

attempts to eliminate vagueness from philosophical inquiry. As with James, vagueness carries for Woolf the important valence of gender: calibrating, for instance, evasive and indirect behavior as a feminine quality mirrored in language and aesthetics, and set in opposition to the direct, precise language defended by the philosophy of the male-dominated academy. Quigley notes the term coined by Woolf, “vagulous,” and links it to the French for wave, *vague*, suggesting that Woolf’s interest in the metaphors of water allows us to better understand her position on the fluidity of language and subjective experience. Quigley’s analysis of Woolf’s fiction begins with *Night and Day*, a novel that “teaches the reader to accept” the vagueness of language, and indeed of the world itself, that is the hallmark of Woolf’s experimental writing. This includes the novel *Jacob’s Room*, in which vagueness acts as resistant to the “learned objectivity” and “impersonal Oxbridge philosophy” associated with “the causes of the war” (94), and *The Waves*, in which vagueness finds its greatest articulation even as it moves closer and closer to the solipsism that Russell abhorred.

In her third (and for this author most interesting) chapter, Quigley charts the parallel intellectual developments of James Joyce and Ludwig Wittgenstein, showing how each began with an image of language free from, or only partly informed by, vagueness that was gradually exchanged for an embrace of the concept and its potential. The focus of the analysis is largely on Wittgenstein’s notion of language-games; a philosophical departure from his earlier analytic position, words in this account “cannot be rigorously analyzed” because their definitions depend upon their usage and are therefore “‘vague,’ ‘blurred,’ and indistinct” (106). Using Wittgenstein as a lens, Quigley suggests that in Joyce’s fiction words operate in the same fluid and contextual manner and that the verbal pyrotechnics of *Portrait*, *Ulysses*, and principally *Finnegans Wake*, disrupt the reader and call attention to the social and political dimensions of language use. She writes: “Establishing that languages—rather than God-given or quantifiable—are social games, enmeshed in the power relations of nationhood, gender, race, and sexuality, is one of Joyce’s most central and continuous themes” (106). In what is perhaps the book’s most enthralling reading, Quigley considers Joyce and Wittgenstein through the figure of C.K. Ogden, whose translation of the Anna Livia Plurabelle section of *Finnegans Wake* yields an exemplary instance of that “great gulf between logical and natural language,” of that which “aims to control language’s vagueness” and that which aims “to liberate it” (138).

The conclusion of the book veers away from modernist fiction toward the poetry of T.S. Eliot, and the afterlives of his criticism. It is here that Quigley stakes her greatest theoretical claim, positioning her work among the recent developments in “Weak Theory” and “Fuzzy Studies” that uphold notions of kinship, affective relationality, and blurriness as the indices of a critical and hermeneutical position that opposes, in the words of Jeffrey Perl and Natalie Zemon Davis, an “abominable clearness” (441). Probing Eliot in light of analytic philosophy, particularly that of Bertrand Russell, the suggestion here is

that Eliot's interest in logical and positivistic thought inflected his criticism and the criticism of those "in his wake [who] aimed to place [it] on firmer logical and anti-aesthetic footing" (148). It is precisely this that Quigley wishes to challenge, suggesting in line with Heather Love that empiricism's return—in the guise of "some digital humanities, distant readings, or cognitive scientific approaches" (148)—be offset by methodologies that are, in Richard Rorty's words, less "clear, hard, defined" (170). Lamentably, however, this association with Weak Theory, Fuzzy Studies, and anti-analytic modes of reading comes only at the tail end of Quigley's book, more a departing gesture than an integral component of her project. One is left to imagine, then, how this book—had it staged its readings from the outset as an historicized look at the academy's "newest" critical formulations—might have presented itself as a genealogy of the ways in which literature and philosophy are read today. Such a project would no doubt have broadened the appeal of Quigley's book. As we have it here, however, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness* affords us a rich and nuanced portrait of a conceptual quandary—equal parts philosophical and literary—that in its grandest implications can help us to rethink how we read, and to what end.

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Julia Bekman Chadaga. *Optical Play: Glass, Vision, and Spectacle in Russian Culture.* Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2014. 315 pages.

How does material culture shape the way we see the world and operate in it? How do the objects around us take on symbolic meanings and, even more importantly, generate their own? In *Optical Play: Glass, Vision and Spectacle in Russian culture*, the pervasiveness of glass in modern Russian material culture draws Julia Bekman Chadaga into a rich, compelling exploration of the various dimensions of the culture of glass, from the details of its production and commerce to its symbolical domain in literature, architecture, and rhetorical discourse at large. While the book focuses on Russian culture, its claims resonate with the interests of a comparative study of literature, thanks to a well-balanced alternation between local details and broader historical, conceptual lines.

While Chadaga emphasizes, from the very title of the book, the visual effects and operations enabled by glass, her book does much more than focus on the